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Monkey Cage Analysis

How the Rohingya crisis is affecting Bangladesh — and why it matters

By Mayesha Alam

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As of February 2018, the United Nations estimates that almost 1 million Rohingya refugees have fled Burma's [violent campaign of ethnic cleansing](#). Almost universally, they've moved into refugee settlements in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

That is straining Bangladesh, which has absorbed a remarkable number of people in just six months, leading to desperately cramped conditions in the camps. Bangladesh is small, low-lying, under-resourced and overcrowded. And its leaders and citizens are [growing impatient](#) with the fallout of Burma's purge of the Rohingya. Here are five ways this massive number of refugees is straining their host nation.

Political impact

When the military of Burma, also called Myanmar, launched its mass violence campaign in late August 2017, Bangladesh was initially reluctant to open its border to Rohingya refugees. Under international pressure, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina quickly relented. Since then, Bangladesh has been unable to organize the international diplomatic support needed to decisively end the crisis.

With China and India both standing behind Burma, and a general election scheduled for later this year, Hasina's government recently reached a [controversial bilateral "arrangement"](#) with authorities in Naypyidaw, Burma's capital, to repatriate refugees. Dhaka initially insisted that repatriation be completed [within two years](#) — but the deal's terms are ambiguous and impractical. Neither international organizations nor refugees were consulted in devising the plan. Many Rohingya are apprehensive about hasty forced repatriation, and opposition to the plan is [growing within and beyond](#) the camps.

Security challenges

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) militant group, whose attacks on Burmese security posts last year triggered the army's indiscriminate "clearance operations," has pledged to [continue its insurgent campaign](#) against what it calls "Burmese state-sponsored terrorism." The Bangladeshi security establishment is concerned both that ARSA will try to recruit within camps, and that it will use the camps as a base for cross-border fighting.

Is ARSA linked to other regional or international terrorist organizations? So far, that's unclear. Shortly before the new year, al-Qaeda in the subcontinent [issued a declaration](#) urging Bangladeshi Muslims to mount an

armed rebellion in support of the Rohingya. It's hard to tell whether that resulted from links between the two groups. But extremist networks in Bangladesh and Burma, whether led by [hard-line Islamist preachers](#) or [radical monks](#), are gaining influence.

Economic effects

Bangladesh's GDP per capita is a meager [\\$1,400](#). However, in 2016 the national economy grew by [7.1 percent](#), and the country has made remarkable progress toward the [Millennium Development Goals](#). While extensive international humanitarian relief has poured in to support the refugees, that doesn't cover all the [economic costs](#) to the government or to the border region's Bangladeshi citizens. The influx's full effect may not be apparent for some time.

The coastal town and beaches of Cox's Bazar used to be Bangladesh's main tourist destination; now the area is awash with foreign aid workers. The area's hoteliers are prospering, and many Bangladeshis have found jobs with humanitarian organizations. But [day laborers and poorer locals have complained](#) about price hikes for basic goods and about losing work to refugees willing to accept far lower wages.

Social strains

The refugees have changed the demographics of Bangladesh's Ukhia and Teknaf areas, [where Rohingya now outnumber locals 2 to 1](#). Of the [approximately 900,000 Rohingya](#), 73 percent are living in new spontaneous settlements, 13 percent in makeshift settlements, 9 percent among host communities, and 5 percent in formal refugee camps. [Kutupalong](#) camp is the largest and most densely populated refugee settlement in the world.

Authorities want to prevent Rohingya from assimilating into the local population. Camps are educating the Rohingya in English and Burmese, but not in Bengali. New refugees are barred from Bangladeshi citizenship through either [birth](#) or [marriage](#).

The birthrate among the Rohingya is also much higher than that of Bangladeshis; in 2018 alone, experts expect refugees to give birth to [48,000 babies](#) — who will face severe risks of [malnutrition, disease and death](#). After diphtheria broke out in December, authorities launched a massive [vaccination campaign](#). Although immunization has long been available to Bangladeshis — including in rural areas — public health officials worry that waterborne and other communicable diseases might spread beyond the camps.

Refugees are also at risk for trafficking, including for [sex, drugs and labor](#). Abul Kashem, head of Help Cox's Bazar — a local nongovernmental organization working to prevent trafficking and raise awareness among youth — warns that organized crime networks are eager to exploit those displaced by the crisis.

Environmental destruction

The environmental impact of 1 million refugees is difficult to overstate. The U.N. Development Program recently released an environmental assessment, identifying 28 risk factors threatening biodiversity and human

security. At the peak of the violence, each week some 100,000 Rohingya — mainly women and children — were crossing into Bangladesh. Where they settled, [thousands of acres](#) of national forests were cleared. Areas previously inhabited by [wild elephants](#) are now barren. The lush, green, hilly landscape has rapidly transformed into flattened stretches of red earth covered in tarp tents as far as the eye can see.

Bangladesh is highly susceptible to climate change. For years the country has been grappling with soil erosion, rising sea levels and [frequent natural disasters](#) such as cyclones and floods. Landslides are extremely likely; many worry about what will happen to the refugee settlements when the monsoon season arrives next month. Groundwater sources are quickly being depleted and freshwater streams have become contaminated. Air pollution in Ukhia and Teknaf has increased because of smoke from firewood burned by refugees and exhaust from thousands of trucks, jeeps, and cars bringing people and goods into the camps.

The dramatic environmental consequences of this massive migration will last for years, affecting people who live inland in Bangladesh and beyond.

As the world continues to grapple with large-scale population movements across borders — whether because of conflict or Mother Nature — much deeper, context-specific research on political, economic, social, security and environmental impacts is imperative to helping neighboring countries manage protracted crises in humane and sustainable ways. This is essential to ensuring that refugees do not become scapegoats in host countries like Bangladesh, where frustration among ruling elites and the local population may result in the forced return or further dislocation of the already dispossessed Rohingya.

Mayesha Alam recently returned from conducting research fieldwork in Rohingya refugee settlements in Bangladesh. She is a Soros New American Fellow pursuing her PhD in political science at Yale University and the author of “[Women and Transitional Justice](#)” (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

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